

Devotional and Selections

THE SILENCES OF OUR LORD ON EARTH.

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"Jesus held His peace."

One of the defects of our modern life is its want of silence. Every one wishes to speak; few are willing to listen and learn. Men invent universal languages, devise means for talking to the ends of the earth, or for reproducing the voices of the very dead. "Looking round," says Carlyle, "on the noisy inanity of the world, words with little meaning, actions with little worth, one loves to reflect on the great Empire of Silence—higher than the stars—deeper than the kingdoms of Death."

The gift of silence may be as valuable as the gift of speech. Even Job's comforters began well when "they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great." The founder of the Dutch Republic had the best possible tribute paid to his power of keeping counsel in the name he still bears—William the Silent. "No one," says Thomas a Kempis, "is safe to speak, but he who would rather hold his peace."

There is something to be learned, then, from the silences as well as from the words of our Master. "Silence," says Ignatius, "is characteristic of God, speech of mankind. The acts which Christ has done in silence are worthy of the Father; and he that truly possesses the word of Christ is able even to hear His silence."

A long silent preparation was needed for our Lord's public ministry. So far as the world without was concerned, by far the greater part of His life was spent in silence. The prophet had said, "He shall not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets." Three years of speaking demanded for Him thirty years of silence. Only once during these silent years is the veil lifted, and even then we find Him not teaching, but learning and asking of those who taught. Even after His ministry began it had long intervals of silence. He would go up to a mountain to pray, and continue all night in prayer to God. In the hour before His agony "He withdrew to a solitary place, and there prayed." And He impressed the need of a like silence on His disciples. He warned them against anything like ostentation. He bade them give alms in secret, fast in secret, pray in secret.

The lesson is one for us all. True religion has always recognized the need for silence. In some religious communities men have placed themselves under a vow of silence, some not opening their lips for years. Friends or Quakers are sometimes known as "children of silence," from their practice of sitting dumb till the Spirit moves them to speak. These are extreme examples; but it is not to any one's credit that he must always talk and will never listen. We miss a great deal by reason of our much speaking and our vain repetitions. We would all do well to spend some part of our day in silence, and in thinking of things other than our business or our pleasure.

Sometimes our Lord could teach better by silence

than by speech. His silence had a testing effect; it brought out force that would otherwise have lain dormant. To the woman of Canaan, for example, who came beseeching Him to heal her daughter, He at first answered not a word. But this perplexing silence had the effect of trying her faith, and making her persevere till her object was won.

It is in some such way that we often have to wait for His answer. To our most earnest prayers His first reply is often a silent one, and we think His ear deaf and His lips dumb. Yet this silence of His may be very helpful. We do not always answer a child's question at once, but often wait to draw out a better. And without such silence on God's part there were little room for faith on ours. In a life that had everything made clear and plain, interest and aspiration would cease. Nor does God remain silent forever. Our prayers are answered as surely as Christ answered the woman of Canaan, "Great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt."

Another effective use which Christ made of silence was as a means of rebuke. It is, no doubt, a form of rebuke which must be used sparingly. As a rule, it is best to answer a question courteously, even though we think the question unnecessary. Yet there are offenses for which silence is the only sufficient rebuke. Impertinent curiosity is one of these, and it was by silence that our Lord met it. "When Herod saw Jesus," we read, "he was exceedingly glad: for he was desirous to see him for a long season, because he had heard many things of Him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned with Him in many words; but He answered him nothing." It was the only way to deal with a man of such coarse fibre. Herod wanted to see a miracle, not for any good it would do him or any one else, but simply to gratify his vulgar curiosity. And for that very reason our Lord would show him no miracle, nor deign him one word. There are people who must be treated in the same way; questions and letters that deserve no reply; actions on which the only comment must be silence.

Indecent conversation, too—coarse or profane or blasphemous talk—is best met by silence. When men brought to Jesus a woman who had sinned, and eagerly asked His opinion on her case, "Jesus stooped down, and with His finger wrote upon the ground, as though He heard them not." As the author of *Ecce Homo* was the first to point out, He was ashamed of listening to a foul story. He could not meet the eyes of either the crowd, or the accusers, or the woman. He turned aside, therefore, and made as though He had not heard. That is the best way to meet all similar conversation. Open rebuke may do more harm than good; but we can at least be silent. We can refuse to smile at a coarse jest, or follow up a doubtful line of talk, or cap one bad story by telling another. Indecency, like impertinence, should be met, as Christ met it, with silent contempt.

Most impressive of all is our Lord's silence under suffering. "He was oppressed," says Isaiah, "and He was afflicted; yet He opened not His mouth: He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth." We